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U.S. Military Strategy in El Salvador

The war in El Salvador has been going on for more than a decade. U.S. efforts to assist the government of El Salvador in defeating a coalition of Marxist-Leninist insurgent groups have been costly in an economic sense, controversial in the domain of domestic politics, and successful, albeit not victorious, from a military perspective. There is therefore, much to learn from an analysis of the U.S. military strategy employed there, as few other foreign policy issues have held the attention of the American people over the past ten years more than this one.

The purpose of this essay is to present a critical analysis of American military strategy in El Salvador using, as a basis for analysis, the case study: American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador, by LTC A.J. Bacevich, USA; LTC James D. Hallums, USA; LTC Richard H. White, USA; and LTC Thomas D. Young, USA.

To determine what should be done with military forces to achieve success, one must first define success. American involvement in El Salvador, to paraphrase the authors, is something of an experiment, an effort to win a "small war" without the active commitment of American combat troops. Although they do not use the terms military strategy and political or military objective, the authors properly point

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out that in the early years of the first Reagan administration, ..."the strategy was to prevent the further spread of revolution in Central America and to domesticate -- or overthrow -- the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua." Using the same tone to compose a political objective for our strategy in El Salvador, one might accept: to promote democracy and prevent the overthrow of the Salvadoran government by the insurgent forces of the Marxist-Leninist, Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN).

I believe that an accurate expression of the political objective is essential to set the proper tone for American military strategy. Our case study authors did not take up this issue, and they should have, because it is important here, just as it was in Vietnam. A political objective should positively state what must be accomplished. Is it sufficient to simply prevent the FMLN from overthrowing the Salvadoran government? If the answer is yes, then we have been marvelously successful in the execution of our strategy, as we have been "preventing" for ten years now.

Aren't we really interested in democratically elected governments in the region that are free of corruption and responsive to the needs of the people? It seems to me that what we are after in Central America are two objectives that go hand-in-glove. We want democratically elected governments, and we want to defeat the leftist insurgencies that threaten them. We should not be willing to tolerate

living with the FMLN for another ten years at a cost of God knows how many more Salvadoran lives and American dollars.

Implicit in the defeat of leftist insurgencies is the understanding that victory comes through government that serves the people. I reject the suggestion that victory is defined as the defeat of the insurgent forces on the battlefield. The greatest opportunity for victory is through political, economic and social reform, and our efforts in the region should focus on these priorities. I conclude this segment with my own submission of a political objective for El Salvador: To ensure the continuance of a democratically elected government and to defeat the coalition of insurgent forces known as the FMLN by providing political, economic and military support (without the commitment of combat forces).

It is not sufficient to analyze what must be done on a bilateral basis to achieve a national political objective, because there is more often than not a host of competing and conflicting regional activities which impact on the problem. In their case study, Bacevich, et al., rarely mention the impact of the Sandinistas on events in El Salvador; nor do they address the influence of Fidel Castro and the support he consistently rendered to the FMLN. Even the communist insurgent force in neighboring Guatemala is worthy of note in that it has been a source for the infiltration of arms to the FMLN. Each of these outside influences hindered

American ability, and certainly Salvadoran ability, to accomplish their respective political objectives. An analysis of the U.S. military strategy in El Salvador must assess the political objectives of our adversaries to understand how they impact our ability to achieve our goals. The authors failed in this important area.

The will of the American people to get involved in El Salvador was another key feature of our strategy there. As the authors so accurately stated, our strategy was to figure out a way to win without using our own troops to do the fighting. The will of the people, represented by the Congress of the United States, placed significant constraints on our military involvement. The number of military advisers was limited to 55, and they were not permitted to accompany the units they advised into the field to assess their competence.

Although the military contribution to the war effort was unquestionably significant, the authors point out that ... "none of the officers we talked to viewed the Salvadoran insurgency as primarily a military problem. All expressed the belief that only through political, social, and economic reform in addition to its military effort could the Salvadoran government hope to defeat the insurgency." In recognition of this, the United States pumped close to three billion dollars into the country in the form of direct

economic and security assistance over a period of nine years (1979 to 1987).

This massive infusion of economic and military aid served to sustain the Salvadoran government, although mismanagement of much of it became a major weakness. It is important to note that although the American people were not willing to assume a heavy military burden in El Salvador, they were willing to commit to a significant economic investment to achieve the national political objective. It is equally important to note, since the authors did not, that persistent governmental corruption and repression of the people by the Salvadoran armed forces affect American will and commitment, potentially constraining the use of military, economic, and political power to achieve the political objective.

Finally, the authors failed to investigate U.S. military strategy to determine the priorities for our political objectives in the region. Since strategy is defined as a plan which links ends and means, no assessment of such a plan is complete without a discussion of the relative importance of the stated and implied political objectives, for they form the basis for our national military strategy.

Having determined the political objectives and their relative importance, the military strategist identifies the objectives achievable by use of the military. He then

assesses the impact of accomplishment on the people, the government, and the armed forces. The case study accomplished this adequately. Citing the 1981 "Woerner Report" as the base document which guided military actions in El Salvador, the authors then presented a comprehensive discussion and critique of the American military effort.

The "Woerner Report," a document jointly drafted by Americans and Salvadorans, "...outlined a plan to expand, re-equip, and retrain the El Salvadoran Armed Forces to withstand the FMLN." Although our case study authors were not specifically composing, nor quoting, American military objectives, their choice of the word "withstand" was most unfortunate, and perhaps revealing. If withstanding the FMLN is the definition of success, then we have accomplished our military objective. The word connotes simple opposition or resistance. If we go back to our political objective of defeating the FMLN it is then easier to determine exactly what should be done with our military capability to help the Salvadoran Armed Forces succeed against a determined enemy.

American assistance in training and equipping the Salvadoran military proved to be quite successful, but the other instruments necessary for success have not been used as effectively. Without chronicling the inconsistent American economic support and the mismanagement of the aid program, it is readily apparent that our political rhetoric was far more vociferous than our programs were effective.

Governmental corruption persisted and incidents of military repression continued to undermine efforts to gain the trust and confidence of the Salvadoran people. The case study treatment of the political, economic and military efforts in executing the strategy is very well done.

Not so well covered was the discussion of the political objectives of the FMLN, their capability to achieve them, and their strategy for linking resources to the accomplishment of their objectives. In order to succeed at defeating a dedicated insurgent force, we must understand his aim. In this case, the FMLN had the objective of overthrowing the government of El Salvador, and installing a leftist government on the model of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. In my view, the FMLN consistently failed at the most important key to success for an insurgent movement: securing a popular support base. This has become the FMLN's greatest vulnerability, as it threatens the survival of the organization.

The FMLN receives external support, not only from the Sandinistas, but also from Cuba, the Soviet Union and other eastern bloc countries. This not a trivial feature of this war, yet it received no treatment by the authors. Its omission in an analysis of military strategy would be fatal, as external support affects U.S. behavior in its bilateral relations with El Salvador, and certainly affects U.S. relations with the adversaries supporting the FMLN. Lastly,

no listing of critical military, economic or political objectives would be complete without the inclusion of operations and initiatives to terminate or disrupt the provision of external support to the FMLN.

It is not enough to focus solely on the enemy in a region as troubled as Central America. Knowing your friends can be equally important, as the instability in neighboring Honduras and Guatemala can affect the war in El Salvador. The catalyst for peace may emerge from a neighboring state as well. For example, in 1987, Oscar Arias, then President of Costa Rica, crafted a formula for peace which became known as the Central American Peace Accord. All five of the Central American presidents signed the accord, agreeing to open dialogue with insurgent forces within their borders. They also agreed to hold free and open elections. Although progress in the peace process faltered, the accord remains as a potential point of departure for negotiations in the future, particularly in the aftermath of the recent election defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The demise of the FMLN's role model has already prompted one key rebel leader to speak publicly in support of a negotiated settlement.

As developments in Central America move swiftly, it appears that the likelihood of negotiated political settlements make the political instrument of foreign policy the strong horse in the field. However, strong economic

and security assistance programs will reduce the government's vulnerability to a resurgence of guerrilla activity. The defeat of the Sandinistas at the polls may prove to be the catalyst that ultimately results in victory over the FMLN in El Salvador.

Once the political and military objectives have been sorted out, and the capabilities and vulnerabilities of the adversary have been thought through, the military strategist takes a look at the capabilities and vulnerabilities of his own forces and determines the types of operations he can conduct to accomplish the military objectives. Unable to commit American forces to the fight in El Salvador, U.S. planners initiated a robust security assistance program to improve Salvadoran capability to fight the war themselves.

A concerted effort in the areas of force structure changes, training at the tactical level, infusion of helicopters, limited amphibious operations, night operations for ground and air forces, and staff training of service staffs made a significant contribution to increasing the professionalism of the Salvadoran armed forces. The authors' treatment of this effort was thorough and insightful. Similarly, an excellent discussion of the vulnerabilities remaining in the armed forces and the government shows just how fragile our success has been. Were it not for similar FMLN vulnerabilities, El Salvador might have been lost by now. Efforts to crack cultural

proclivities for governmental corruption and repression by the military have not made sufficient headway.

As the strategist matches military capabilities against the objectives he must accomplish, he quickly discovers the need to prioritize. In so doing he needs a vision of how the various forces will be employed to best accomplish the objectives. He determines how he will sequence operations to accomplish strategic objectives. In El Salvador the U.S. advisers assisted their Salvadoran counterparts in parting with their penchant for static defense of critical installations, and launched airmobile operations against guerrilla strongholds. In effect, with American assistance, the Salvadoran armed forces stole tactical mobility from the rebels. The success of American-induced battlefield success caused the rebels to revert to a strategy of protracted warfare, employing hit-and-run tactics and small unit operations.

The final step in the formulation of military strategy is analysis of the likely outcome of execution. Weighing the benefits, costs and risks, the strategist assesses the probability of success for the plan he has generated. He looks at the costs in terms of projected casualties, equipment and money consumed, the affect on the will of the people, and the international impact his strategy might have. In our case study, analyzing our strategy has been an ongoing process. Every new initiative requires a new

assessment of where we are, and where we are going from here. As recent developments have favored the expansion of democracy in Central America, the economic and political aspects of our national strategy have gained in importance relative to our military strategy.

In conclusion, to conduct a comprehensive analysis of a nation's military strategy, one must include all of the key features of the military strategy process. The case study mentioned herein is an excellent treatment of the actual performance of U.S. military efforts to implement policies of the U.S. government. Although it addresses many aspects of the military strategy we have pursued in El Salvador, its scope is limited. It does not adequately cover the insurgent threat, the contribution of neighbors and allies, the need to prioritize objectives to facilitate the allocation of resources, and the importance of conducting a cost-benefit analysis to judge the adequacy of the strategy. However, the insight it provides and the weaknesses it identifies in the American military effort in El Salvador make it an extremely useful document in the likely event we should commit ourselves to support a government under siege in the future.